

## 12: Early Rome *System Change: Autonomy*

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### *Autonomy, stress, and historical change*

Have you ever said, or heard someone else say, “You’re not my boss!”? Having control of one’s own life and fate—“autonomy”—is a deep-seated human need (an important Shared Idea). When it’s missing, feelings of **helplessness** and **frustration** cause stress.

**Action Patterns:** People often react to the feelings caused by lack of autonomy in ways summarized below. Some reactions may help increase autonomy, others may help cover up feelings of helplessness:

1. **Group formation.** Joining with others; forming groups to gain collective power.
2. **Opinion appeal:** Publicizing the situation in an attempt to gain support, perhaps by marching or staging a demonstration.
3. **Economic or other pressures:** Striking (refusing to work), boycotting (refusing to buy a company’s products), or devising some other strategy.
4. **Violence.** Directing anger or violence at those seen as causing the problem, or at something of value to those people.
5. **Scapegoating:** Blaming individuals or groups other than those actually responsible for the situation.
6. **Over-conformity:** Strangely, conforming as closely as possible to what it’s assumed the dominators want. This reaction is most likely when the dominating group has overwhelming power.
7. **Escape:** Stress may be alleviated or masked through use of alcohol, drugs, entertainment, etc., or by physically moving away from the situation.
8. **Other-worldliness:** Those feeling helpless may turn to religion, superstition, magic, or some other supernatural intervention.
9. **Stasis:** Doing nothing because the situation is seen as hopeless.

## Investigation: Autonomy in Early Rome

Reactions to lack of autonomy show up everywhere in history. Of course, some reactions, such as group formation and violence, are more likely to be remembered and recorded than some of the other reactions, so not all reactions listed on Page 1 will be found in ancient historical accounts.

Roman historian Livy (Titus Livius Patavinus, 59 BCE-17 CE) wrote a major history of Rome (*Ab Urbe Condita Libri*). Events he describes below occurred 500 years earlier, long before the time he was writing, so his account may be inaccurate, perhaps with major errors. However, historians have not found any earlier sources.

The section of Livy's account in the data that follow begins in 495 BCE. At this time, the city-state of Rome was governed by a Senate. Senators were men born into wealthy, aristocratic families—nobles called “patricians” (literally “fathers”). Each year the Roman Senate elected two patricians to be “consuls”—leaders who acted as chief executives, judges, and (often) military generals.

The consuls had a great deal of power, especially over Romans who weren't patricians—commoners called “plebeians.”

Before, during, and after this period, Rome was engaged in almost continuous warfare with outside groups, so military service by plebeian soldiers was vital to survival of the city.

***In the following data, identify and list ways in which people feel they lack autonomy, and each kind of reaction to that feeling. Be specific in your description of the reactions. Note that in some cases, more than one group may feel they lack autonomy, and some of their reactions may not exactly fit the categories on Page 1.***

Livy's account:<sup>1</sup>

War with the Volsci was about to start, but a major internal disagreement between Roman citizens was growing. Trouble between the patricians [nobles] and plebeians [commoners] had turned into fiery hatred, because many people were forced into slavery by their debts.

Commoner men complained loudly that while they were away from home fighting for liberty and control of Rome's enemies, their fellow-citizens at home were taking actions that would force them into slavery. They claimed that plebeians had more freedom in war than in peace, more freedom among enemies than among citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> Livy, *The History of Rome*, Book 2, Chapter 23 & 24 (adapted) <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>



<http://www.orbilat.com/Languages/Latin/>

Map of central Italy showing tribal or ethnic societies, about 500 BCE.

This rapidly-growing bitter feeling was fanned into flame by the terrible condition of one person. An old man, showing evidence of his troubles, was brought into the Forum [central public square]. His clothes were covered with filth, and his body was in even worse condition. He was pale and half dead from starvation. His wild beard and hair made him look like a savage. In spite of his appearance, people recognized him. The word went around that he had commanded companies of soldiers. Military honors he'd won were mentioned by sympathetic bystanders. Scars on the man's body proved he had participated in many battles.

The crowd gathered close around him and asked what had caused his troubles. He answered that while he was serving in the Sabine war, the enemy had destroyed his crops, burned his cottage, stolen his property, and driven off his flocks of livestock.

But government officials demanded the usual taxes, and he was unable to pay and had to borrow money from a rich noble. The amount he owed the noble (his creditor) increased rapidly because of interest charges and the noble took his farm—a farm that had been his father's and grandfather's. Then the creditor took away everything else he owned. .

Finally, he himself became the victim. The noble to whom he owed money carried him off, not to make him a slave, but to throw him into prison and the torture chamber. He then showed the crowd his back, with fresh scars from being whipped.

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The man's appearance and his story caused a mighty uproar. The demonstration that began in the Forum spread in all directions through the city. Debt slaves, some of them wearing chains, came into the streets everywhere. They pleaded for the crowd to protect them. Everywhere, volunteers joined in the uprising. They streamed through the streets, shouting, and hurrying to the Forum.

Patrician senators who happened to be in the Forum were in great danger as they were surrounded by the mob. They would almost certainly have been victims of violence, but the consuls [supreme executives and judges]—Publius Servilius and Appius Claudius—moved quickly to stop the rebellion.

The crowd turned on them, showing them their chains and other hideous signs of their slavery. These, they cried, were the rewards they had earned, and they described the military campaigns where they had served. They demanded (a threat more than a request), that the consuls convene the Senate, then surrounded the Curia [the Senate meeting building], so they could see and influence the government decisions.

The consuls were able to bring in only a few of the senators. The rest were afraid to enter not only the Curia but even the Forum. There weren't enough senators to take action, so nothing could be done. The people assumed the authorities were ignoring them, and believed the senators were told to stay away so no action could be taken, not because they were either afraid or couldn't be contacted. They assumed that the consuls were avoiding the issue, even making fun of their misery.

If the situation had been a little worse, even the power of the consuls could not have controlled the angry crowd. But then the missing senators decided they might be in more danger by not showing up, and came forward into the Curia. Finally the required number of senators arrived and began the meeting.

They could not agree about what action to take, and even the two consuls disagreed. Appius, a stubborn man, wanted to settle things with forceful action and the authority of the consuls. He said that when one or two men had been arrested, the others would calm down. Servilius, more inclined to gentle measures, believed that it was safer, as well as easier, to soften their fury than to stamp it out with authority.

In the middle of this debate a greater disruption came from another source. Some Latin horsemen galloped up with the disturbing news that a Volscian army was advancing to attack the City. This report raised very different feelings in patricians and plebeians, since their disagreements had completely divided the state.

The commoners were filled with joy. They said that the gods were acting to punish the arrogance of the senators. They encouraged one another not to volunteer for military service. It would be better to perish all together than alone. They said, "Let the patricians serve, let the patricians take up arms, so those who receive the rewards of war might experience its dangers."

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The Senators were downcast and dismayed, afraid of both their fellow-citizens and the enemy. So they begged Servilius, the consul, who was more acceptable to the people than Appius, to save them and save Rome from the fearful dangers it faced.

Servilius ended the Senate meeting and went before the people...

Based on the authority the Senate gave him, he issued commands: No one was allowed to hold a Roman citizen in chains or restraint and prevent him from volunteering for military service. No one was allowed to seize or sell a soldier's property as long as he was in camp, or interfere with his children or his grandchildren.

With this news, the debtors who were present at once enlisted. From every quarter, all over the city, debtors hastened from the places where their creditors no longer had the right to detain them, and rushed into the Forum to take the military oath.

It was a great throng. The soldiers who enlisted proved to be among the best in courage and effectiveness in the Volscian war that followed.

Over the next few days (according to Livy), the Romans fought and won battles not only against the Volscian army, but also against a Sabine and an Aurunci army, all of whom were threatening Rome. (See map, Page 3). The story continues:<sup>1</sup>

After their victories, the Roman soldiers expected the promise of freedom made by the consul [Servilius] to be carried out.

Appius, partly because he loved tyranny and partly to undermine the influence of the other consul, gave the harshest sentences he could when debtors were brought before him. One after another, those who had before pledged their persons as security for loans were now handed over to their creditors as slaves. Others were forced to pledge to become slaves if they failed to repay loans.

A soldier to whom this happened appealed to Servilius, the other consul. A crowd gathered round Servilius. They reminded him of his promises, and pointed out their services in war and the scars they had received. They demanded that he should either get an ordinance passed by the Senate, or, as consul or commander, protect his soldiers.

The consul sympathized with them, but he could not help. The other consul and all the patrician nobility insisted on continuing the policy of debt slavery. He tried to compromise, but this only led to his being intensely disliked by both the patricians and plebeians. He ended up being hated just as much as Appius.

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<sup>1</sup> Livy, *The History of Rome*, Volume 2, Chapters 27-29 (adapted) <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>



The Roman Senate in the Curia (artist's conception) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cicero>

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If the commoners saw a debtor being hauled away to be judged, they ran from every direction to help him. The consul's judgment verdict was drowned out by the crowd's noise and shouting, so it could not be heard, and the verdict was ignored. Instead of the debtors being afraid and in danger, now the creditors were threatened. Many of them were singled out and treated violently by the commoners, in full sight of the consul.

On top of these troubles, the city feared an invasion by the Sabines. Officials issued a decree to form an army, but no one enlisted.

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Aulus Verginius and Titus Vetustius then became consuls. The plebeians did not know what to expect from them, and began to hold secret meetings at night in the hills around the city. They thought that if they met in the Forum, officials might push them to make bad decisions.

The consuls thought the meetings would lead to trouble and brought this matter to the Senate, but the senators objected strongly, shouting it down. They said it was the consuls' job to keep order, and they were wrong to bring the issue before the Senate. The consuls were told that unless they took control of the plebeians, the only assembly in Rome would be that of the plebeians, with not one, but a thousand meetings. They scolded the consuls, saying that one man like Appius, with the courage to use his authority, could put an immediate stop to the disruption.

The consuls asked for advice, and said that whatever the Senate desired they would do, acting with force. Together, they decided to hold a military draft of the plebeians, and put them to work. They thought the plebeians were lawless because they were idle.

The consuls ended the meeting, and went out onto the raised platform (tribunal) to speak to the crowd. They called out names of young men who were ordered to report for military duty but no one answered to his name.

The crowd surrounded the speakers and told them they wouldn't believe any more lies, and that not a single soldier would serve without a public guarantee. Liberty must be given back to every man before he would accept weapons. Each man would fight for his country and his fellow citizens, but not for a master.

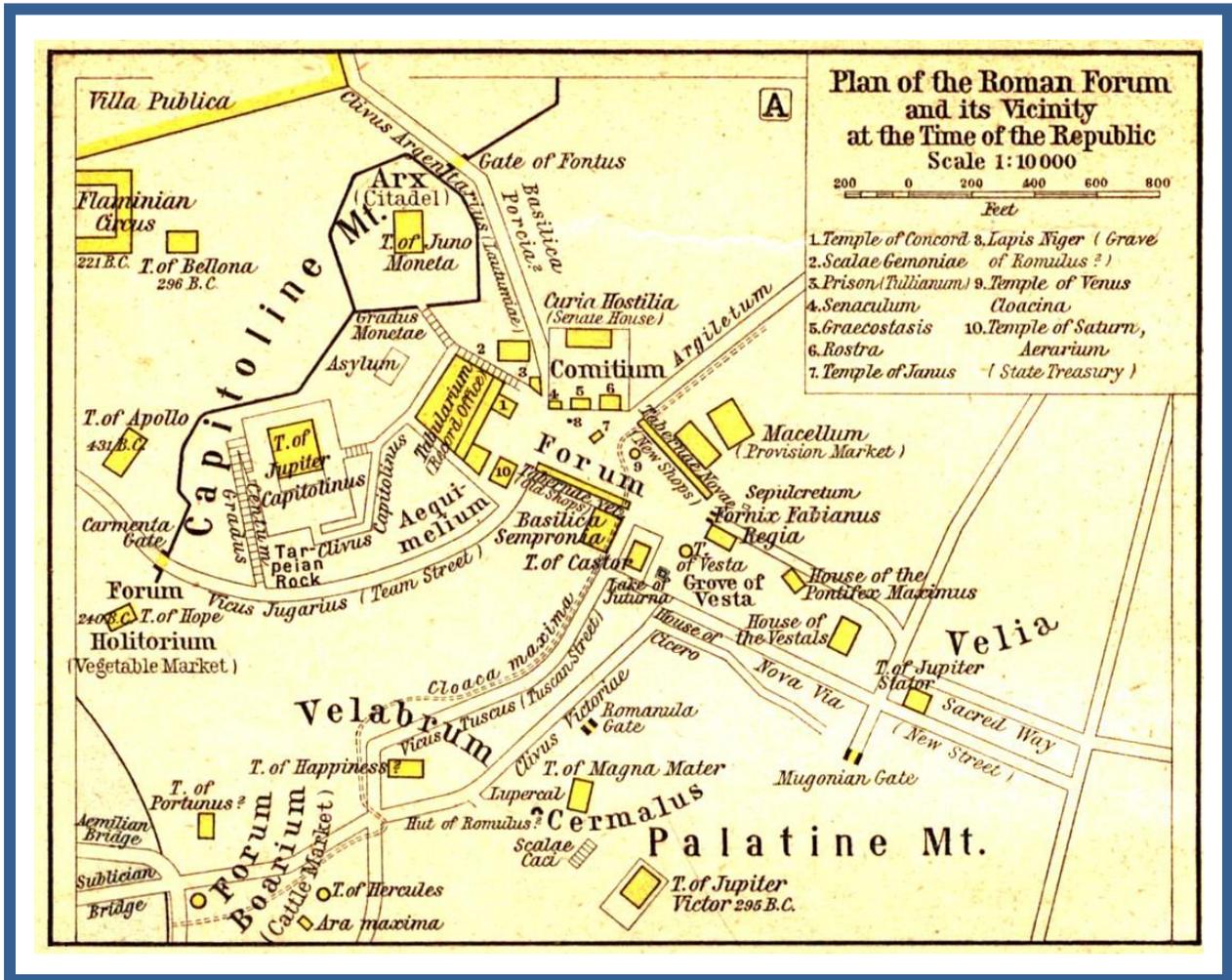
The Senate's orders to the consuls were clear, but none of the hostile senators were there to share the difficult situation. The consuls could see there would be a terrible struggle with the people, so they thought it best, before going to extremes, to consult the Senate a second time.

When it met, the youngest senators all rushed angrily to confront the consuls, telling them to resign and give up their authority, since they didn't have the courage to do their job.

After considering whether to resign or continue, the consuls finally said: "Don't say we didn't warn you, senators. We are on the verge of a great mutiny. We demand that those who are loudest in accusing us of being cowards stand with us while we issue the public call to military service. You who are the most severe shall guide the procedure."

They returned to the tribunal, and deliberately called the name of one man they could see in the crowd, commanding him to report for military duty. He stood still without answering, in the midst of a little knot of men who, fearing the possibility of violence, had gathered round him. The consuls sent a lector [an official guard] to arrest him. The lector was pushed away. Then, calling out "Shame!" the senators who were standing with the consul rushed down from the tribunal to assist the lector.

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[http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/shepherd/republican\\_forum\\_shepherd.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/shepherd/republican_forum_shepherd.jpg)



The Forum at the center was the public meeting place for city residents. Note the “Curia Hostilia” just north of the Forum, where the Senate met. Many of the buildings were religious temples (marked “T.”).<sup>1</sup>

Left: Forum ruins in present-day Rome

[www.gothereguide.com](http://www.gothereguide.com)

<sup>1</sup> University of Texas at Austin. *Historical Atlas* by William Shepherd (1923-26), p. 24

The mob turned from the officer, whom they had merely stopped from arresting the man, and attacked the senators. The consuls then stepped in and stopped the brawl. No stones had been thrown nor were any weapons used. No real harm was done, just angry shoving and shouting.

The Senate met immediately, but with much confusion and disorder. Those who had been roughed up demanded an official investigation. The more violent members agreed, with shouted speeches.

Eventually their anger cooled and the consuls criticized them for showing as little sanity in the Curia as in the Forum. Then they began an orderly discussion of the problem.

Three proposals were made. Publius Verginius advised against freeing all the debt slaves, giving freedom just to those who had fought in the recent battles because of the promises made by consul Publius Servilius.

Titus Largius said that this was no time for limiting freedom to those who served. All the plebeians were buried in debt, and they all needed a solution. He said that if some got their freedom, and others did not, plebeian anger would increase, not decrease.

Former consul Appius Claudius, naturally a harsh man, was made savage by the hatred of the plebeians on the one hand and the praises of the patricians on the other, Appius said that it was not misery, but too much freedom that had riled up the plebeians, and they were not just angry, but were criminals.

This trouble-making opinion appealed to the Senate, since the consuls lacked the power to stop the uprising. “Come,” said Appius, “let us appoint a dictator who will have absolute and final authority. This will stop the uprising that threatens us immediately. They’ll know that anyone who strikes a dictator violates the dictator’s majesty, and the dictator will have the violator whipped or beheaded!”

A dictator was appointed—not Appius, but Valerius, who wasn’t inclined to be cruel to the plebeians. Rome was being threatened by several enemies, and the dictator made promises to the plebeians similar to those made by Servilius. These promises were accepted, and almost all of the plebeian men volunteered for military service. Over the next weeks, the Roman armies won battles over three major opponents.

Once the battles were over, the Senate met again to consider the issue of debt slavery. They rejected the promises made by Valerius, and he resigned as dictator. He went home, supported by the plebeians who knew Valerius had tried to help them, and failure was not his fault.

***In your opinion, are the senators reacting to threats to their own autonomy? If so, do their responses fall within categories on Page 1? Give reasons for your answers.***

The senators started worrying, fearing that if the army was broken up, the plebeians would start having secret meetings and conspiracies. So they came up with a plan to call the army together again and take them out of the city, using the false excuse that one of their enemies was threatening.

This brought the revolt to a head. At first (some say) the plebeians talked of killing the consuls, thinking this would free them from the oath of obligation they had sworn when they enlisted. But they were told that their oath was sacred, and committing a crime wouldn't wipe it out.

So, without orders from the consul, they left the city and camped on a hilltop three miles away. There, without any leader, they fortified their camp with stockade and trench, and waited to see what would happen. They took nothing except what they needed to survive, and stayed there quietly for several days. Nobody bothered them, and they did not cause trouble.

There was a great panic in the City. Every group was fearful, and all activity stopped. The plebeians, abandoned by their friends, feared violence at the hands of the senators. The senators feared the plebeians who were left behind in Rome. No one knew what would happen next, and they also worried about threats from other states.

The Senate decided to send an ambassador to the plebeian camp on the mountain, and a compromise was negotiated. The plebeians were allowed to meet in their own assemblies, and choose their own leaders, called "tribunes." The tribunes would act as their representatives, and helped limit the powers of the patricians and their officials. The tribunes of the plebs were *sacrosanct*, meaning that any assault on their person was prohibited by law.

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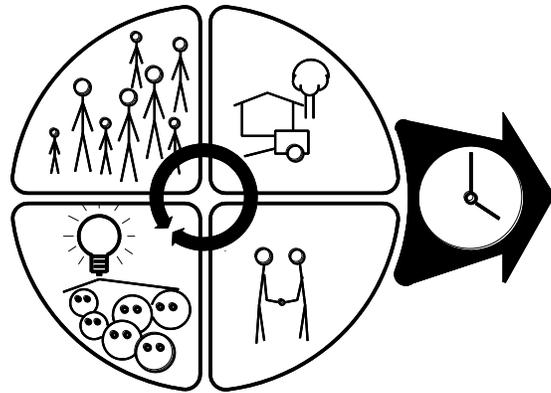
This was only a temporary end to the conflict between patricians and plebeians. In the next two hundred years, over and over, conflict recurred, and the plebeians gradually won additional autonomy. Often, however, new kinds of repression were imposed on them. Eventually, plebeians were made eligible for election to the senate. Some who had become wealthy and powerful formed a new layer of nobles, allied themselves with the patricians, and together this oligarchy ruled Rome. The autonomy of most plebeians remained limited throughout this era.

***You've identified several reactions to feelings of lack of autonomy in early Rome. Which of these reactions, in your opinion, were effective in increasing the autonomy of those with aroused feelings? Mark your list of reactions to indicate your view of the most and least effective strategies.***

## Follow-Up: Autonomy Here and Now

In the words of the Declaration of Independence, basic human rights include “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”—autonomy. Almost every law being passed, every speech by people running for office, every war being fought relate in some way to maintaining, increasing, or preventing future loss of autonomy. Actions and proposed actions affect different groups differently—some will be helped, others may be harmed.

*From the pages of newspapers, news magazines, or from TV news, collect information about a conflict, a demonstration, words of a political speech, summary of a court decision, or summary of a new law. Analyze this data to identify ways in which the information you’ve collected is related to autonomy—the people affected, the effects on those people, and ways in which people are reacting to inadequate autonomy.*



### **For Teacher/Mentor—Overview:**

As I started to write this section (August 11, 2015), an “Education alert” arrived by email from the *New York Times*. Its title: “50 Years Later, We Still Haven’t Learned from Watts.” Tag line: “The riots capped years of activism and anger, but the media pretended they were spontaneous. Sound familiar?”

The article goes on to cite the history of racial discrimination in Los Angeles, the pervasive school segregation affecting African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans, limits on hiring of minority teachers, and formation of groups and protests and other civil rights-related actions prior to the Watts riots. The article also pointed out the extent to which the white power structure and media seemed unaware of the situation, in spite of Watts residents’ attempts to publicize their frustration.

The article was triggered by the one-year anniversary of the events in Ferguson, Missouri, that began with the death of teenager Michael Brown.

We said in *Investigating American History*: “**A main cause of stress, both individual and social, is loss or lack of control over one’s own fate.** Stress due to loss of autonomy is one of the prime drivers of historical change, and it’s nearly impossible to overstate its importance in influencing past and future events. Pick up any newspaper, and look for articles and letters about demonstrations, violence, anti-government protests, calls for organization, or complaints against ‘outsiders.’ Feelings of lack of autonomy will motivate those speaking or taking action.”<sup>1</sup>

Autonomy is a shared idea, probably universal, since it is closely tied to success and even survival. As with other shared ideas we call “values,” if it’s significantly threatened, it triggers stress and powerful emotions related to frustration.

Ignacio Carral’s original version of this unit included sources for the famous slave rebellion headed by Spartacus, and introduced the Roman gladiatorial contests as a form of escapism—another common response to inadequate autonomy. However, we’ve chosen to focus this unit on events in Rome during the early years of the republican era, contemporary with events we’ve described in units for Sparta and Athens. The extensive reading from Livy included here tell the story of the beginnings of the “conflict of the orders.”

From our American history course: “The two most important sources of inadequate autonomy are *repression by more-powerful people or groups*, and *adverse economic conditions*.”<sup>2</sup> This unit illustrates both of these sources.

The vast significance of autonomy (or its lack) in shaping history and ongoing human behavior makes it an essential concept. For more on this subject, see <http://marionbrady.com/americanhistory/AutonomyQuotes.pdf>.

**The unit objectives are, first, to develop understanding of the concept of autonomy and the feelings aroused when it’s inadequate, and second, to help learners grasp**

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<sup>1</sup> Brady, Marion and Howard Brady, *Investigating American History (TE)*, p. 86  
<http://www.marionbrady.com/documents/AHHandbook.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Brady, op. cit., p. 77.

**the nature of the responses (listed on Page 1), and their pervasiveness in the real world.**

### *Investigation: Autonomy in Early Rome*

Two levels of reading can be associated with stories and accounts of events like that selected from Livy's history in this unit: (1) simple comprehension of the sequence of events that make up the story, and (2) detailed analysis (i.e. "close reading") of the account to look for patterns and principles. Both kinds of reading are needed, and they work better if they're not combined. Learners with some level of reading difficulty— younger and ESL students—may benefit by having the story read to them.

The first account in the narrative—the war veteran victimized by his creditor—may be used to reinforce the basic concepts related to autonomy. Bringing the wronged man into the Forum to act as a catalyst to arouse support for the plebeian cause is a variation of "opinion appeal." However, the case was somewhat special because there was no separate "public" from which to gain support. The "public" was mostly the group with the problem. However, obtaining relief requires reaction #1—group formation—and publicizing the circumstances of the suffering veteran helped develop this reaction.

Responses one through four (group formation, opinion appeal, pressure tactics and violence) are all illustrated in some form in the data, but none of the other reactions listed on Page 1 are shown, with one briefly-mentioned exception:

From Page 4, last paragraph: "The plebeians were filled with joy. They said that the gods were acting to punish the arrogance of the senators."

Supernatural intervention is frequently the "hope of the hopeless."

**Social stratification:** Although social stratification isn't a primary focus of this unit, throughout history it's closely related to inadequate autonomy for those low on the status ladder. Social stratification was visited (as part of demographics) in the unit on ancient Egypt, but it's not just a demographic factor. It has played an important role in every society beginning with Mesopotamia (and probably earlier). Rather obviously, it's both a pattern of action and shared idea. The three clear status levels—patrician, plebeian, slave—in early Rome are obvious in the data in this unit, but also illustrate the differences between *achieved* status (movement between slave and plebeian classes), and *ascribed* status (hereditary for patricians, requiring both parents to be patricians).

Additional questions for investigation:

- ***What's the relationship between membership in one of the three classes—slave, plebeian, patrician—and autonomy? Is this relationship between class or status and autonomy the same for other societies?***
- ***A person was a patrician only if both parents were from the patrician class. What might explain how this situation developed?***

Obvious questions such as, "What are the three classes?" are best avoided, along with questions that likely turn this into an emotional issue, e.g.: "Was it fair that birth in the patrician class was the only way to become one?"

(HLB) August 2015, minor revision June 2018.